Human Events *A Weekly Analysis for the American Citizen*
Editorial Office 1323 M STREET, WASHINGTON 5, D. C. *Telephone* NATIONAL 2066
VOL. IV, NO. 49, *Issue Number* 201, DECEMBER 3, 1947 ★ *Editors:* FELIX MORLEY & FRANK C. HANIGHEN

WHAT IS WESTERN CIVILIZATION?

by Felix Morley

No phrase with tremendous implications is used more glibly than "Western Civilization". Yet, as generally used, there is a highly controversial implication that the North American Continent has failed to develop a civilization of its own.

The assumption that there has come to be an indivisible cultural unity among mankind is due in part to the influence of Christianity; in part to the work of historians whose interest rises above the level of a single nation; in part to the attraction of such appealing slogans as "One World". In other words, Religion, Scholarship and Idealism have worked hand in hand to create the concept of a human unity, effective from China to Peru, on which an effective international order can be established. The catalytic agent necessary to crystallize this assumed unity is said to be "Western Civilization".

Undoubtedly there are spiritual, intellectual and emotional forces which tend to unify men, regardless of their color, creed or nationality. True Christianity leaps these barriers; Euclidian geometry surmounts them; so -- fortunately -- does the compassion aroused in almost everybody by the tear-stained face of an unhappy and bewildered child.

Undoubtedly, also, the mechanical progress of our times has brought men into closer contact with each other; has placed the majestic impartiality of the gasoline motor, the electric generator and the chemical reagent at the service of Hottentot, Hindu and Hillbilly. It may be only a matter of time before the atomic bomb -- supreme product of what some people mean by "Western Civilization" -- will become similarly commonplace.

But all this is very different from saying, as Professor Toynbee does in A Study of History that: "In the new age, the dominant note in the corporate consciousness of communities is a sense of being parts of some larger universe." If there is really that immanent sense of unity one can only conclude that it was successfully concealed at the session of the United Nations Assembly just terminated.

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We owe it to the Communists, who have no use for God, that this pleasant over-simplification about the universality of "Western Civilization" is now being sharply deflated. We owe it to Franklin D. Roosevelt, as much as to any single man, that the Communists are now in a position to force their own bizarre concept of civilization on a very large portion of mankind. We owe it to ourselves to begin to reflect more deeply on what civilization is.

The net result of the last war can be put in four words. It shattered European civilization. The First World War, with American participation, weakened the cultural basis of European life. The Second World War, in which we really went all out, has smashed that cultural basis -- irrevocably. That was neither our intention nor our desire. But the evidence in the case now forces honest men to admit that our major contribution was destruction.

To the mind which has trained itself to view events in historical perspective, the present policy of the United States is of extraordinary philosophical interest -- not pleasing, necessarily, but interesting because of the "categorical imperative" which is so obviously involved. Confusedly and obliquely, but nonetheless definitely, we are working to reconstruct what we have destroyed; to make of the ruins something of a barrier against the former gallant Ally who has now become the insidious Enemy.

The Communists speak the simple truth in saying that the American Government is endeavoring to restore what is left of Germany, to support disintegrating Italy and to strengthen impoverished Japan -- all as barriers against the further spread of Communist influence. Any high-ranking military man will tell you this, without equivocation. And if there are lingering doubts on the subject they can be resolved by observing the "new look" of Franco in Spain, and Peron in Argentina. There will be no more State Department blue books on the iniquities of these dictators; no more official attempts to unhorse them. Franco and Peron have become our potential buddies.

It is less than five years since Wendell Willkie, after two talks with Stalin, informed us that: "We do not need to fear Russia. Such fear is weakness. Russia is neither going to eat us nor seduce us." Today we are asked to give everything that was not wasted in the last war in order to save "Western Civilization" from Russia. Is it not high time then, to ask ourselves: What is this Western Civilization which we are forever setting out to save, yet never saving?

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Though only fragments now remain, Europe certainly had a well-developed civilization. Some of its qualities were intangible, but the essential characteristics can easily be identified.

It was a civilization of great cities, storehouses of art and learning and other cultural manifestations; inhabited by a phenomenally large number of well-bred, nice-mannered, highly intelligent and generally humanitarian men and women. A "standard of living" to these Europeans was not a measure of material aggrandizement. Their standard of living was the classic Greek ideal of restraint and moderation, tempered by that lively interest in abstract ideas which is also of Attic origin.

There is nothing accidental in the fact that European civilization was so distinctively urban. After the fall of the Roman Empire the land was held not by those who were willing to work it, but by those who were strong enough to monopolize it. The feudal system was designed to protect the privileges of these great proprietors, of which the Medieval Church was one. This system meant debasement and virtual slavery for actual tillers of the soil. It meant also an inert and stagnant social order which could be changed only by developing a central government sufficiently powerful to subordinate the great Estates of the lords temporal and spiritual.

As the walled cities grew up, the burghers were therefore in natural alliance with the weak government of the king against the great feudal lords. And as this alliance gradually overcame the baronage it was <u>from</u> the towns, along the "king's highway", that prosperity and a measure of security gradually penetrated the country. "It is thus", in the words of Adam Smith, "that through the greater part of Europe the commerce and manufacture of cities, instead of being the effect, have been the cause and occasion of the improvement and cultivation of the country."

Thus was developed the cosmopolitan urban quality of European civilization, permitting a cultured Viennese to feel completely at home in Paris or a London spinster to settle down happily <u>en pension</u> in Florence. But thus also was developed the centralized power which, at the service of modern nationalism, was eventually to smash these lovely cities and with them the civilization that focused there. Not all those cultural centers are today such rubbish heaps as Dresden and Nuremberg. But those that remain give only a dim -- and moribund -- reflection of the <u>esprit</u> that was dying even before Hitler.

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In America, on the other hand, agriculture came first -- not commerce and manufacture. The progress of European civilization was from town to country -- called by Adam Smith an "unnatural and retrograde order". The progress of American civilization was what this shrewd observer called the "natural order" -- from country to town. Writing The Wealth of Nations at the close of the colonial period Smith noted that:

> "It has been the principal cause of the rapid progress of our American colonies towards wealth and greatness that almost their whole capitals have hitherto been employed in agriculture."

Though there are many superficial identities and similarities, American civilization has from the very outset followed a diametrically opposite course to that of Europe. The direction of development has been different and from that difference of direction springs the wholly different and much more healthy attitude towards centralization, regimentation and other fundamental political problems.

There are indications, other than our inability to keep out of Europe's wars, that America is becoming Europeanized. Excessive urbanization, against which something of a reaction has now set in, is one of these. But it can help neither Europe nor America to pretend, as many do, that our civilization was never anything more than an overseas transportation of something indigenous to Europe. This country started in a different direction. Its system of government was designed to keep it in a different direction. And the popular instinct to maintain this difference has not been obliterated by the idiotic attempt to silence believers in the American tradition with the slur of "isolationist".

European civilization was in many ways much more gracious and pleasant than anything America is likely to produce. It was, for instance, essentially aristocratic whereas the dominant American culture, though not the system of government, has always been essentially democratic. We are not arguing that one of these two civilizations -- Russia is something else again -- is superior; -- merely that the two are fundamentally different.

The pretense that Europe and America share a civilization called "Western" was never intellectually convincing. If we had really understood the European spirit, obviously we could not have destroyed its corporate body so lightheartedly. That disaster, however, is now a tragic chapter of history. The biggest question for Americans today is: Do we understand our own civilization well enough to maintain it?

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Not Merely Gossip *A Supplement to* Human Events VOL. IV, NO. 49

By Frank C. Hanighen December 3, 1947

The ashes of the unsatisfactory November elections are still being raked by diligent students of political science. They have come up with several warm coals to which they are according microscopic examination. Scrutiny of returns from the two principal recent by-elections, in Indiana's 10th and Ohio's 4th districts, shows that the Republican majority was reduced about 5 per cent. This has led to some gratification among Democrats, especially because the reduction was made in the two city areas, Muncie and Lima. On the other hand, it is noted that both Democratic candidates in these districts were conservatives, so conservative indeed that they refused to attack the Taft-Hartley Act. How the Democrats can square this trend (if it is a trend) with their present strategy of courting the Left Wing vote has yet to be explained. At any rate, the by-election results leave the picture in greater confusion than ever.

Another overlooked development also attracted scrutiny; all the more so because it has been high lighted by the Daily Worker. That paper called attention to the fact that on November 4, in Chicago, an independent "Progressive Party" piled up 113,000 straight votes and 313,000 for its top candidate, Homer F. Carey, a Northwestern University professor. The election was for judicial offices. The rump slate opposed a coalition Democratic-Republican ticket. The Progressive Party got about 16 per cent of votes cast.

It is believed that the Party qualifies for appearance on the ballot next year, in the primary and general elections. The Chicago Sun remarked, "The Shadow of Henry Wallace hangs ominously over the Democratic Party". It is by no means certain, of course, that the new Party will fall into the hands of the Communists, but the tenor of the Daily Worker's remarks suggests that the Commies have cast a covetous eye on this group of voters. The threat of a third party on the ballot in such important states as Illinois, New York and California cannot be ignored.

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The five-star general of the Democratic GHQ, Senator McGrath, has attracted some confusing comment recently. His opposite number, Mr. Carroll Reece, has dubbed him a "Rhode Island Red". But now the Democratic Left Wing is criticizing him for a flirtation with Mr. Jouett Shouse, of Liberty League fame. Mr. Shouse is so far to the Right in the Democratic Party, that the charge seems very odd indeed. But students of the more basic aspects of political science suggest a solution of the mystery.

Senator McGrath is in quest of no less an element than "the big money", to which Mr. Shouse is believed to have particular access. This factor in the coming election has been giving Democratic politicos much concern. Contributions from Labor treasuries are barred by law. And the present "Left Wing" strategy is not calculated to relax the checkbooks of big contributors.

It is believed that Forrestal had been planning to tap Wall Street coffers, but these plans may well have been impaired by the antitrust suit recently filed by the Department of Justice. The brief, as a matter of fact, was long ago prepared by Justice, and was made public as a matter of political strategy. But was it good strategy? "Roosevelt would have held such a suit until after election", is one remark often heard. And it cannot be denied that Mr. Truman lacks the nice attention and timing accorded such important details by his predecessor.

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Talk of war in Europe is at a premium these days, with returning Americans quoted in the press as saying that Russia could take over Western Europe in 48 hours. Communist aggressiveness in Italy and France additionally increases nervousness. Therefore, it is reassuring to report that one reliable and well-informed observer discounts such alarmist discussion. We have recently received an analysis of the military situation in Europe from a former high officer on the German General Staff. In this document, the officer (now in civilian life in Western Germany) stresses that Soviet preparations in Europe are defensive in character. He makes four points in support of this thesis:

(1) Contrary to much information in the American press, our informant states categorically that Russia has already destroyed so many factories in Eastern Germany capable of supplying her armies that it is obvious that no offensive bastion is being made ready there. Either Russia doubts her ability to hold Germany in case of war, or her plans suggest that she considers Germany a subsidiary theater.

(2) Russia has been tearing up, rather systematically, one track of double-track railways. It is pointed out that if Russia were contemplating action in Western Europe, she would need all the railway tracks available to supply armies moving towards the Rhine and Channel.

(3) Our informant says he has definite information that the Soviets are now engaged in building defensive fortifications on the Oder and Neisse rivers, the present eastern boundary of Germany. This leads to the natural conclusion that the Soviet marshals regard Eastern Germany as only an outpost zone, not as a main battle position to be held at all costs.

(4) The Russians are visibly suffering from a very severe gasoline shortage in Eastern Germany, according to this authority. No Russian commander, it is asserted, would consider offensive action in such circumstances, particularly with the trend towards motorization and mechanization of the Russian Army. The oil must come from the Caucasus, in tank cars -- not a ready method of transportation.

In this latter connection, our informant says that it is a Soviet must, in case of war, to strike immediately southward into the Middle East. Most Russian oil comes from the Caucasus, which is vulnerable to air attack. And Arabian oil would be a rich prize. These views, considered in the light of Russian participation in the inflammable Palestine situation, cast a shadow on this otherwise reassuring analysis. For, in Washington, there is great suspicion and fear of Russia's role in the developing Holy Land crisis.

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Under Secretary Robert A. Lovett proceeded to stand on his head last week when he defended the dismantling of German factories. He claimed that this policy would lighten the ultimate burden on the American taxpayer because the dismantled plants would be used by other European countries to produce the needed goods. Mr. Lovett may have been a good banker, but he would hardly qualify, judging by this statement, as a good consulting engineer.

The equipment of a plant is but one part of the value of the working effective unit. Experience of the last few years in the matter of reparations-from-plant has shown the weakness of the process. Neither the Russians (with German plants) nor the Chinese (with Japanese plants) have made a success of it. Congressional investigators just returned from Europe estimate that the best possible result of reparations-from-plant would be operation at 50 per cent of the efficiency of the unit in its original place.

To operate a plant efficiently, there must be skilled labor, a means of distributing products, construction ability and management "know how". To say that

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German plant machinery shipped to France, for instance, would be producing 100 per cent under the less efficient French engineering system is to tax the credulity of expert engineers. One bill, now being prepared for submission to Congress, trys to deal with this problem, as follows: The American military government would be required to prove that the transferred plant would produce as much as it did in its original place.

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The example of Canada is mentioned in the current debates about the question of Government controls. Because our neighbor has followed a cautious policy of gradual de-control, too many Americans assume that Canada will inevitably, and with less trouble than ourselves, return to the free economy system. The Verner Ottawa Letter does not agree: "Will Canada eventually work back to a system of free prices, free inventory building, free importing, free exporting, free financial settlements -- between business houses and between related individuals? We think not. The die has been cast. Any freeing that may take place from now on will be the result of political and economic expediency and will probably be accepted gratefully by business. But it will not be the relatively complete freedom of pre-war.

"Too many government programs have been allowed to perpetuate themselves and finally become integrated to an amazing degree with the private business pattern right down to its very fundamentals. Bulk purchasing and systems of subsidization are among the more penetrating and persistent of these hangovers; and that goes too for punitive taxation and continuation of tax and other source deductions from payrolls. Today Canada's Federal economic control structure has become entangled with almost every phase of national life."

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Americans assume that because the British are on "our side" in the great ideological struggle with totalitarian Russia, therefore they will wholeheartedly follow the American line of resistance to Russia, even into the furnace of atomic war. A visitor from England, Mr. J. L. Benevista, writing in The Commonweal (November 14) seeks to disillusion Americans of this view: "Whatever political forms they adopt, nations are guided by what they conceive to be their vital interests and by what they conceive to be the means of achieving security and survival. If they cannot achieve security and survival, under the conditions they desire, they will seek to achieve them under less desirable conditions, but survival and security remain their main objectives, and it is, I am afraid, not yet proven that the nations of Western Europe do consider their role as bastions of the United States, for that is what it amounts to, to be conducive to their survival and their security. . . .

"We conceive of it (war) as we have experienced it ourselves and as we have seen our European neighbors experience it, and we know that whether we emerge as nominal victors or losers, another war means virtually the end of us as a nation. We also know that in the last war we were only separated by a hair's breadth from disaster, and we are unlikely to be so lucky again.

"This is not a matter in which the categories of heroism and cowardice have any relevance or application. The record of British heroism is too deeply written in the book of history to need proof or illustration from the present writer. But no country commits itself to certain annihilation, and that, as I have just pointed out, is what the next war, whether we lost or won it, would in all probability entail."

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Book Events

Will Dollars Save the World? by Henry Hazlitt. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc. $1.50. Reviewed by J. M. Lalley.

Mr. Hazlitt's answer to his own rhetorical question is that nothing will restore prosperity to the world except productive labor, free markets and stable currencies and that these will not be possible until artificial restrictions on economic activity are everywhere removed. Thus it is by no means improbable that an unending stream of American dollars will be pumped into Europe to no better purposes than the aggravation of economic chaos on that Continent and inflationary bankruptcy at home. Mr. Hazlitt's little book, in short, is a biting analysis of the Marshall plan in terms of classical economic theory.

His theses are: first, that loans made by our government to governments abroad will, in the nature of things, be used for political rather than for productive purposes; second, that such forms of foreign aid as are contemplated in the Marshall plan must accelerate the inflationary boom that is evident in the United States and already almost past control -- in other words, it is a repetition on a vaster scale of the fallacious practices that led to the catastrophic collapse of 1929-31. The argument on the first point is that the borrowing government by making itself responsible for the allocation of foreign exchange resorts to devices, such as import quotas and licenses, which have at once the effect of impeding recovery and of increasing the power of the government over the lives of the governed. This becomes evident as the borrowed funds are exhausted and cries are simultaneously raised for new loans and for more stringent economic controls.

On the second point the argument is, simply, that since the export of goods and services from the United States cannot be continued indefinitely, it is manifestly the part of wisdom to check it now. In the first six months of this year the surplus of these exports, for which of course there was no return in wealth, amounted to $12,000,000,000. This was, in effect, an arbitrary and artificial enlargement of the ratio of currency to purchaseable wealth; the $12,000,000,000 thus distributed to Americans in the form of wages and profits was of course immediately absorbed by a corresponding rise in prices of the commodities available in the domestic market, especially food. To prevent an even greater flight of goods from the domestic market the Government must strive to undo with its left hand part of what it has done with its right hand; it must maintain quotas to regulate the volume and character of exports to the European government to which the American people have transferred so great a share of their purchasing power. Even this, however, cannot check the inflationary momentum; hence the Administration's demand for the restoration of its wartime powers to regulate domestic markets.

At the basis of Mr. Hazlitt's reasoning is the premise that mixed economies -- that is, partly Socialistic and partly capitalist economies -- are anomalous and in the long run impossible. The choice, then, is between a completely planned or totalitarian economy, and a completely free one. The program of seeking to achieve recovery through intergovernmental loans works, therefore, in favor of totalitarianism both in Europe and at home.

What Mr. Hazlitt proposes is that, except for short-term emergency credit, the business of foreign loans be restored to private bankers; that the United States lead the way to a general stabilization of currency by reverting to the gold standard; that tariffs be lowered immediately; that an end be made to capital seizures in Germany and Japan and reparations paid out of income; and that whatever further relief is necessary be given in the form of food and clothing rather than money, and given directly under American supervision to the people who need it most and not to politicians.

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